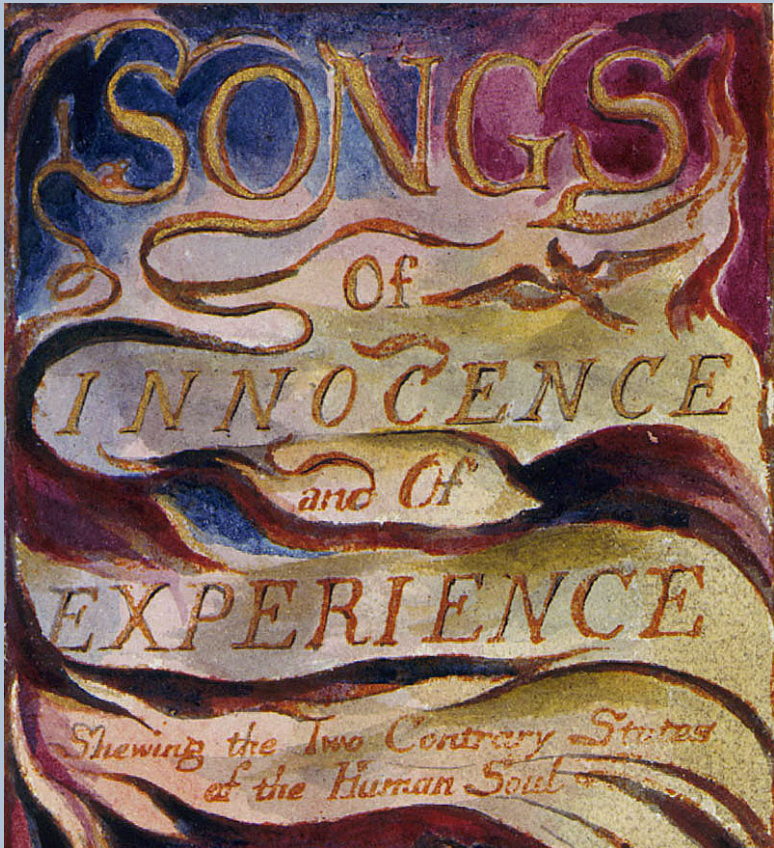


SONGS OF INNOCENCE
AND OF EXPERIENCE



JASON WHITTAKER

ZOAMORPHOSIS ESSENTIAL INTRODUCTIONS

1. BLAKE'S LIFE & WORKS
2. SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE

FORTHCOMING

3. THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL

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AND OF EXPERIENCE

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CITATIONS

All quotations are from David V. Erdman's *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Revised edition. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney and Auckland: Doubleday, 1988. Citations are indicated by the letter E followed by the page number in Erdman's edition.

CHAPTER 1: BLAKE'S ILLUMINATED PRINTING

Songs of Innocence and of Experience is the best known of William Blake's works in illuminated printing, the art form with which he is particularly associated. The Songs were not Blake's first production using the technique of relief etching, the earliest known examples being *There is No Natural Religion* and *All Religions are One*. These were probably produced in 1788 (according to a reference made by Blake in his late work, *The Ghost of Abel*), that is a year before he published *Songs of Innocence*.

COMMERCIAL PRINTMAKING & RELIEF ETCHING

As Joseph Viscomi points out: "No printmaker before Blake had incorporated the tools and techniques of writing, drawing, and painting in a graphic medium, though the materials and tools were commonplace." (Viscomi 2003 42) At the time when Blake worked, most commercial engraving on copper plates was via a process known as intaglio engraving, where lines were cut into copper directly or alternatively through a waxy varnish, with acid then eating into the copper plate before the lines were then worked over and enhanced with the engraver's burin, a fine steel cutting tool.

This was how Blake produced most of his commercial work, but it was an extremely laborious process and the delicate lines produced with a burin were not suitable for substantial amounts of text. As such, intaglio engravings were typically combined with type set into blocks, Blake himself using this method on his designs for the publisher Francis Edwards' version of the long poem *Night Thoughts*.

For Blake, then, relief etching offered possible commercial advantages over traditional methods, allowing him to combine text and image without the expense of hiring additional typesetters. Because Blake controlled the means of his own production, it also enabled him to pursue highly idiosyncratic art forms, although this should not be interpreted as a desire on his part to ignore commercial considerations. During the nineteenth century it became fashionable to see Blake deliberately opposed to profit, but the *Songs* in particular were printed to take advantage of a growing market for children's books (Darton 108-13).

Relief etching (which Blake also referred to as “stereotype” in *The Ghost of Abel*) was intended as a means for producing such books much more quickly. Stereotype, a process invented in 1725, consisted of making a metal cast from a wood engraving, but Blake’s innovation was somewhat different. Drawing his lines with acid-resistant varnish, the plate was steeped in acid so that the exposed areas of copper were etched away, leaving raised lines that could receive ink. John Jones points out that relief etching “would appear crude compared to regularized typesetting and intaglio line engraving”, something that did not appeal to conventional publishers. For Blake, however, the handmade look of his prints could also appear much more artistic than the “perfection attained through mechanization.” (Jones 30)

THE CREATION OF THE SONGS

In *William Blake: The Creation of the Songs from Manuscript to Illuminated Printing* (2000), Michael Phillips provides a comprehensive account of how the *Songs* came to be composed and printed. Phillips points out that there are two surviving manuscript sources for some of the *Songs of Innocence*: an early version of “Laughing Song” written in his 1783 book, *Poetical Sketches*, and the manuscript of *An Island in the Moon*, written some time between 1782 and 1785 and which contains versions of “Holy Thursday”, “Nurses Song” and “The Little Boy Lost”. For the later *Songs of Experience*, Blake worked on versions of poems such as “The Tyger” in his Notebook, revising them again and again until he was satisfied with them enough to prepare them for printing.

When working on the copper plates, Blake’s technique was somewhat different to the usual one employed by engravers. Typically, the artist would cover the entire plate with acid-resistant varnish (also called the “ground”) before using his tools to score or scratch lines through that varnish down to the plate. By covering the plate with nitric acid, or aqua fortis, the exposed lines would be eaten away, creating grooves in the plate that would hold ink while the level surface of the copper was cleaned for printing, a process reversed by Blake:

Instead of covering the entire plate with a varnish or ground and cutting his design into it with engraver’s tools, he used the varnish like ink and the copper plate like a sheet of paper. Dipping his quill pen or fine pencil brush into the acid resistant varnish he wrote his text and drew his design directly on the polished surface of the plate, just as a writer would write out fair copy and as an artist would draw. All of the surfaces that were not protected were then corroded or eaten away by the acid, leaving raised lines which would be inked for printing. (Phillips 15)

Joseph Viscomi, in *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (1993), emphasises just how important this technique of drawing was to Blake, allowing him to compose freely on the plate rather (than as was previously thought) creating designs first of all on paper before transferring them to the plate. "While Blake often used tools of the printmaker in addition to the tools of the poet and painter, the initial design was executed like a pen and wash drawing." (Viscomi 1993 64)

While some of the early versions of the *Songs* in particular were printed in monochrome, several of them also show signs of Blake's experiments in colour printing. The ability to print colour directly onto a page was an incredibly difficult process that was only gradually improved during the nineteenth century, yet some of Blake's copies of the *Songs* show that rather than just hand-colouring the plates afterwards he also sought to use colour during the printing process. Here Phillips and Viscomi (the latter supported by Robert Essick) part ways: Phillips has argued that Blake used a "two-pull" printing process, using registration pinholes in the paper to allow him to pass it through the printing press twice, once with a monochrome print that was then overlaid with colour. Viscomi and Essick, by contrast, argue that Blake printed his pages just once, mixing different colours onto the same plate. Most Blake scholars working in this field agree with Viscomi and Essick that Blake used a "one-pull" process to print his plates.

COPIES OF THE SONGS

Songs of Innocence was first printed in 1789 and, when he composed *Songs of Experience* in 1794, Blake typically issued them in combined form as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, though he also made the *Songs of Innocence* available on their own until 1818. There are 32 surviving copies of *Songs of Innocence* and 29 copies of the combined *Innocence and Experience*.

While Blake scholars had been aware for years of the different versions of individual copies of the *Songs* (whether *Innocence* alone or combined with *Experience*), it was Joseph Viscomi who, in 1993, most clearly emphasised the importance of these variations from copy to copy. In *Blake and the Idea of the Book*, Viscomi pointed out that Blake most likely worked on print runs, or editions, of his individual illuminated books, making a series of prints over a short period of a few days that could later be coloured, bound and sold to prospective buyers.

Songs of Innocence has thirty-one plates, with twenty-two copies in existence including all the plates (and eight comprising only twenty-seven plates, when Blake moved "The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl Found" were moved to *Experience*). Some of the copies still extant, such as Copy T of *Songs of*

Innocence were printed posthumously, probably by Frederick Tatham who had befriended Blake towards the end of his life and took care of Catherine Blake after his death (Viscomi 1993 248-9). Blake had also taught his wife how to print and colour the copies of books they made together so that she could help him with his work, both of them sharing the task of illuminating the prints.

As Viscomi observes, Blake had a very relaxed attitude towards the *Songs* (1993 274-5). As well as transferring “The Little Girl Lost” and “The Little Girl Found” poems, he also alternated “The School Boy” between *Innocence* and *Experience*, and although “The Voice of the Ancient Bard” was nearly always treated as a song of innocence, Blake did present it as a song of experience in Copy O. In 1793, as Phillips points out, Blake had advertised *Innocence* and *Experience* separately (Phillips 109), and it may have been his intention for them to be available as separate books but he decided against this (at least for *Songs of Experience*) after printing up copies of his new work. By considering individual copies as print runs or editions, it is easy to see that there are distinct phases in the production of the Songs that very often makes them appear to be very different books – for example between the delicate washes of early copies of *Songs of Innocence* produced in 1789 in contrast to the more vividly colour printed versions of the mid 1790s and heavily hand-painted copies from the second decade of the nineteenth century. Viscomi warns against seeing each individual copy of the illuminated books as a revision: they were not meant as unique versions but rather copy-editions, reflecting Blake’s attitudes to his *Songs* at different periods in his own life (Viscomi 1993 374).

CHAPTER 2: SONGS OF INNOCENCE

When Blake decided to compose *Songs of Innocence*, he had already been involved in the market for children's books as an engraver, making reproductions of designs for a children's anthology *The Speaker* (1780) and Laetitia Barbauld's *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781). As Andrew Lincoln observes, he "probably had little sympathy with the education aims of these books, or indeed with much of the children's literature written for the polite market. But he seems to have known the market well." (Lincoln 14).

Such books were often illustrated with engravings or woodcuts, some even being coloured, their designs often demonstrating a familiar vocabulary of images: sheep and shepherds, children playing, mothers with their young children. These children's titles almost inevitably emphasised the religious and moral nature of their compositions, being designed to improve the character of their young readers as well as their education, but Alexander Gilchrist was one of the first to draw attention to the special nature of *Songs of Innocence* as presenting us instead with childhood as a "Golden Age" (Gilchrist 61).

VISIONS OF CHILDHOOD

The poems presented in *Songs of Innocence* are some of the simplest and clearest poems that Blake ever wrote. Many commentators have remarked that this simplicity masks often considerable irony and complexities of thought. While this is true, particularly when the poems are considered against those in *Songs of Experience*, the reader should not rush too quickly to look for hidden depths and subtleties of meaning beyond their gentle, pastoral depictions. Throughout life we are encouraged to view the world through the eyes of experience, and Blake (as he later indicated) understood the importance of this; yet his radicalism as a writer at the end of the eighteenth century was also due to his belief in the power and importance of innocence as a fundamental perspective of humanity.

Blake's ideas on the nature of childhood were not restricted to him alone. In his 1762 novel *Émile, or On Education*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau offered an opinion on raising children that ran counter to many of the ideals of the eighteenth century, arguing that they are ready to learn from their surround-

ings but prevented from doing so by the malign influence of a corrupt society that wishes to distort their natural values to its own ends. Although Blake was later to show himself very hostile to many elements of Rousseau's philosophy and religion, "The School Boy" indicated considerable sympathy to the Swiss philosopher's educational values:

How can the bird that is born for joy,
Sit in a cage and sing.
How can a child when fears annoy,
But droop his tender wing,
And forget his youthful spring. (E31)

Nelson Hilton has suggested that *Songs of Innocence* may be "imagined as a series of vignettes concerning the psyche's birth into language" (Hilton 198). This is complicated, as he points out himself, by the varying order of poems in different copies, so any clear pattern of a child's growth and development must be inferred rather than being explicitly stated, but certainly some poems such as "Infant Joy", "The Lamb" and "The Chimney Sweeper" can be seen as moving us from child as incapable of speech (from the Latin *infans*, non-speaking) to the more ambivalent realisation that while children may be innocent, that is not necessarily the case of their supposed guardians.

One of the most astonishing effects of these early *Songs*, and one that appealed to Blake's contemporaries such as William Wordsworth and Coleridge, as well as Victorian commentators such as Gilchrist and Algernon Swinburne, is the sheer delight taken in musicality for its own sake, for example in the poem "Spring".

Sound the Flute!
Now it's mute.
Birds delight
Day and Night.
Nightingale
In the dale
Lark in Sky
Merrily
Merrily merrily to welcome in the Year (E15)

"Spring" has attracted less attention from critics than many of the other *Songs*, perhaps because it is concerned less with those semantic and symbolic complexities found in other poems than the much simpler pleasures of rhythm,

capturing song and dance in its evocation – both textually and visually – of a rejuvenated natural world.

PASTORAL TRADITIONS

The natural world has an important part to play in *Songs of Innocence*, which can sometimes appear strange to experienced readers of Blake considering his constant inveighing against Nature in the later works. Kevin Hutchings has criticised the commonplace view that Blake is the poetic adversary of nature. The lines and illustrations of these songs (as well as many more of Blake's illuminated books) burst with living creatures and natural settings: it was the abstract conception of Nature as iron law, which he saw in the philosophy of Bacon, Locke and Newton, to which Blake was opposed (Hutchings 4-5).

Even the most cursory reading of *Songs of Innocence* cannot fail to draw attention the pastoral nature of this poetry. Although (as Hutchings remarks), Blake only lived properly in the English countryside at one period during his lifetime, from 1800-1803 when he and Catherine resided at Felpham, the London of the 1780s and 1790s was very different to the vast metropolis that it was to become in the later nineteenth century. Though north London could be a dirty and ill-favoured place, south of the Thames was still largely rural and much less developed and, according to Stanley Gardner, Blake often took long walks to Peckham, Dulwich and Camberwell: "From Golden Square, Westminster Bridge led into the country" (Gardner 43).

The pastoral, then, while a popular poetic form in the eighteenth century, was not simply a literary experience for Blake but one that he was easily able to encounter even in London. That Blake was influenced by pastoral poetry, however, is not to be doubted. Pastoral poetry in western literature began with the *Idylls* of Theocritus in the third century BC, and was established as a classical genre via the highly influential *Eclogues* of Virgil. Works such as Edmund Spenser's *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1579) and John Milton's *Lycidas* (1637) transferred this poetry to England and, in the eighteenth century, many writers invoked the ideal and romanticised imagery of pastoral poetry, most notably in Alexander Pope's *Pastorals* (1709) and James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730), a collection which had greatly affected some of Blake's verse published in the *Poetical Sketches* (1783).

Thus the familiar motifs of shepherd and flock, Arcadian fields and a leisurely ideal, all find a place in *Songs of Innocence*, as, for example, in "The Shepherd":

How sweet is the Shepherds sweet lot,
From the morn to the evening he strays:

He shall follow his sheep all the day
And his tongue shall be filled with praise.

For he hears the lambs innocent call,
And he hears the ewes tender reply,
He is watchful while they are in peace,
For they know when their Shepherd is nigh. (E7)

This simple verse, written in a lilting, anapaestic metre, emphasises the peaceful calm and joy of the pastoral ideal. Nicholas Marsh suggests that there is some uncertainty in the poem, for example that the sheep may be terrified at night when the shepherd is not there (Marsh 15-16). While this undoubtedly may be true, Marsh, like many critics in my opinion, is seeking complexity and ambivalence because radical simplicity is too challenging to the status of many readers, particularly professional readers. If the meaning of such a poem is, after all, open to all, whether children or the uneducated, then what role do critics have to determine – and thus control – meaning?

What cannot be denied is the Christian symbolism contained in this poem. The role of the shepherd reminds us of that of Christ as the good shepherd, who “giveth his life for the sheep” (John 10:11), and the implicit religious symbolism of “The Shepherd” is made explicit in “The Lamb”:

He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name. (E9)

MOTHER AND CHILD

Significantly, Blake does not call upon another important tradition of pastoral poetry in *Songs of Innocence*, that of sexual love. The *Songs* are full of love, but it is the love between parent and child, or child and the natural world, that is more important than that between lovers. In “The Lamb”, as in “The Little Boy Lost” and “The Little Boy Found”, as well as “The Divine Image”, it is the love of the father for his children that is most clearly expressed, following the convention of Christian love from God the Father towards his creation.

And yet, throughout *Songs of Innocence*, it is the love of the mother that is more often given primacy. The Little Boy poems, as we have already seen, were later transferred to *Songs of Experience*, and – unlike “The Shepherd” and

“The Lamb” – it is impossible to miss the anxiety and ambivalence caused by the father’s love, even when they are read as texts of innocence. By contrast, in *Innocence* at least, there is no such ambivalence between a mother and her child, even though that position may be complicated by the later addition of *Songs of Experience*.

In “The Little Black Boy”, the poem begins with the relation of the speaker to his mother:

My mother taught me underneath a tree
And sitting down before the heat of day,
She took me on her lap and kissed me,
And pointing to the east began to say.

Look on the rising sun: there God does live
And gives his light, and gives his heat away.
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
Comfort in morning joy in the noon day. (E9)

At the end of the poem, this mother’s tender concern is replaced by that of God the Father, and there may indeed be some hint of anxiety here, for the illustration to that poem shows Christ gazing intently at the little white, rather than little black, boy. In the mother’s words, however, there is no doubt that her child, like all flowers, trees and beasts, receives God’s love equally and without discrimination.

The protective, nurturing role of mothers is evident in many other poems in the collection. The “Chimney Sweeper” begins, “When my mother died I was very young, \ And my father sold me while yet my tongue, \ Could scarcely cry weep weep weep weep.” (E10) Paternal love can be fickle but the maternal is constant and needs no explanation for its existence in *Innocence*, as when a mother sings “A Cradle Song” to her baby:

Sweet dreams form a shade,
O’er my lovely infants head.
Sweet dreams of pleasant streams,
By happy silent moony beams. (E11)

The importance of this relationship between mother and child, and Blake’s recognition of it, cannot be overstressed. Keri Davies (2006) has drawn attention to some of the female collectors of Blake who were attracted to this feminine strain in his early work, while Helen Bruder (1997) argues that it is in

books such as *Songs of Innocence* and *The Book of Thel* that we see most strongly the influence of women writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft on Blake's ideas with regard to proto-feminism.

The sustained role of maternal love in *Songs of Innocence* may be complicated in *Songs of Experience*, and critics may be correct to see a mother's love as restrictive as well as protective, but to race towards this conclusion too quickly, as with the desire to problematise simplicity is, in my opinion, a serious error. Love may sometimes be a cover for exploitation and the will to power, and innocence may frequently be no more than gullibility, but to assume that both love and innocence have no reality in their own terms is to give too much power to the world of experience the demands for which, as we shall see, Blake fully understood.

CHAPTER 3: SONGS OF EXPERIENCE

When Blake began etching the plates of *Songs of Experience* he and Catherine had moved south of the river Thames to Lambeth, beginning one of the most productive periods in his life for his illuminated poetry. As well as *Songs of Innocence* and of *Experience*, Blake produced the “Continental Prophecies” of *America*, *Europe* and *The Song of Los*, and was to continue with the strange and disturbing series of Urizen books that would detail the titanic struggles between Urizen, Orc, Los and Enitharmon.

Northrop Frye once made the astute remark that it was foolish to see the relationship between *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* as reflecting a transformation in the author’s own sensibilities, “for when Blake engraved the latter he was no longer a child of thirty-two but a grown man of thirty-seven.” (Frye 4) Nonetheless, if it was not Blake who had transformed, then London and the world around him certainly had. In 1789, many liberals in England had looked optimistically to the early events of the French Revolution, but on February 1, 1793, France declared war on Britain, a conflict that was to last twenty-two years, and between the summers of 1793 and 1794 Paris ran red with the blood of the Terror.

REVOLUTION & REACTION

After a period of enthusiasm in Paris following the fall of the Bastille, tensions increased throughout 1790 and 1791. Factions in the French National Assembly were also beginning to form, between those who supported a constitutional monarchy along the lines of that in Britain, and a radical group known as the Jacobins who spread their ideas throughout the country. It was against the backdrop of these conditions that Louis XVI attempted to flee the country, being arrested at Varennes on July 21, 1791. As France declared war on Austria, Prussia and then Britain, waves of violence and massacres shook the French capital in September 1792. Attempts to find a constitutional compromise failed and, on January 21, 1793, Louis Capet, no longer King of France, was executed in Paris and the country became a republic.

Many features of government had now passed to the Committee of Public Safety, dominated by Maximilien Robespierre, and for a year the Terror was in-

stituted in an attempt to suppress counter-revolutionaries at home and ensure support for the war abroad. The Jacobins were able to avoid defeat and expand the military capabilities of France, but Robespierre was now accusing many former companions of being counter-revolutionaries and, on July 27, 1794, the Thermidorian Reaction saw his arrest and execution.

Fear of revolution in Britain led the government of William Pitt to a loyalist reaction, first felt in Scotland a series of sensational trials for seditious libel took place in 1793, the results of which were draconian sentences against Thomas Muir and Thomas Palmer. Historians are divided about the extent of the British government's reaction, figures such as Boyd Hilton (2007) seeing this period as an extension of the coercive powers of the state while Edward Royle (2000) has argued that it was a reasonable reaction to a genuine threat. In 1794, as members of the London Corresponding Society called for an English Convention, Pitt suspended Habeus Corpus and ordered the arrest of its leading members, as well as those of the Society for Constitutional Information. The radical Thomas Paine had already fled the country at the end of 1793, and although the three men finally brought to trial were acquitted there could be no doubt that Britain was a dangerous place for those with radical sympathies.

It was against these events of 1792-4 that Blake composed and published one of his most famous poems, "London":

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I heart

How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldiers sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new-born Infants tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse (E26-7)

For E. P. Thompson, “London” is “among the most lucid and instantly available of the *Songs of Experience*” (Thompson 174). As he and several critics have pointed out, the drafts of the poem in the Notebook show how Blake was responding very directly to the events of his day. Thus the “mind-forg’d manacles” were originally “german forged links”, a reference to the Hanoverian dynasty of George III and the billeting of Hessian mercenaries in London to maintain order in the capital. Similarly, the change of “dirty street” and “dirty Thames” to “charter’d” was a direct allusion to Paine who, in *The Rights of Man*, had argued that charters granting liberties actually worked by taking away intrinsic rights of the people so that they could be permitted only by those in power.

BABES REDUCED TO MISERY

While the first three stanzas of “London” allude to the fierce conflicts and political situations created by the French Revolution, the “youthful Harlot’s curse” of the final stanza refers to the blight of child prostitution that had existed (and was to exist) in London for a much longer period. Stanley Gardner observes that in Lambeth a group of “noblemen and gentlemen” had converted the old Hercules Inn into the Female Orphan Asylum “to save girls between the age of nine and twelve from ‘the guilt of prostitution.’” (Gardner 128) The lives of these so-called “chicken prostitutes” was brutal and fatal, with many not surviving into their twenties as they suffered from violence and those sexual diseases such as syphilis that blasted substantial sections of the metropolitan population.

It is this condition of the young that provides part of the strong sense of anger in *Songs of Experience* and contrasts so clearly with the state of childhood in *Innocence*. If the earlier collection had been a golden, Arcadian vision, Experience depicts the city of dreadful night that London could become at the turn of the nineteenth century. The line “Babes reduced to misery” is taken from “Holy Thursday”, and the contrast between this and the earlier poem in *Innocence* will be considered in the next chapter. What is significant about the later volume, however, is how it depicts innocence corrupted by those who should be its protectors.

In some cases, that corruption was already implicit in *Songs of Innocence*. Thus, for example, the version of “The Chimney Sweeper” that appears in *Experience* makes explicit the sense of anger at injustice that had been left unsaid in the song included in *Innocence*. It could be argued that the clarity of this wrath removes some of the complexities of the earlier poem, replacing it with more straightforward denunciation that exemplifies Blake’s outrage towards his contemporary society:

And because I am happy, & dance & sing,
They think they have done me no injury:
And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King
Who make up a heaven of our misery. (E23)

Chimney sweeping as an apprenticeship was increasingly rejected during the late eighteenth century, and in 1788 the Chimney Sweepers Act was passed restricting the ability to recruit apprentices. However, professional sweeps continued to use their own children to climb the narrow chimneys, made even dirtier by the increased use of coal, and the practice of sending children up chimneys was only made illegal in 1875 (Nurmi 1964). As such, while the poem ends with a general denunciation of God, priest and king who allow such atrocities, the origins of the degradation lie with those parents who seek to exploit, rather than protect, their own children.

The theme of adults conspiring in the abuse of their wards is a familiar one throughout *Experience*. In the second version of “Nurses Song”, for example, the supposed protector of the young is motivated rather by a sense of envy that results in repression of those in her care:

When the voices of children, are heard on the green
And whisprings are in the dale:
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
My face turns green and pale.

Then come home my children, the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise
Your spring & your day, are wasted in play
And your winter and night in disguise. (E23)

There is a subtler evil at play here rather than the outright degradation of the young presented in “London”, “Holy Thursday” and “The Chimney Sweeper”. Rather than crimes such as prostitution, immiseration and slavery, the narrator of this short lyric insinuates her way into the children’s consciousness, working against their simple desire to play and, instead, deviously implanting suggestions of guilt that will become mind-forg’d manacles to bind their joys.

If Blake had a very clear idea of the evils that adults do against their children, he could also present in *Experience* a view of innocence that could confuse his early readers, most notably in “The Little Vagabond”:

Dear Mother, dear Mother, the Church is cold,

But the Ale-house is healthy & pleasant & warm;
Besides I can tell where I am use'd well,
Such usage in heaven will never do well.

But if at the Church they would give us some Ale.
And a pleasant fire, our souls to regale;
We'd sing and we'd pray, all the live-long day;
Nor ever once wish from the Church to stray[.] (E26)

Coleridge was one of the first to express his disquiet at the vagabond's satisfaction with base natural conditions, as did later critics such as Swinburne and the Rossettis. Deborah Dorfman suggested that Blake's own attack was on both institutions, church and alehouse, where the "ossifying" merges with the "stupefying" (1969 22), but it is hard not to smile at the comical vision presented in the final stanza:

And God like a father rejoicing to see,
His children as pleasant and happy as he:
Would have no more quarrel with the Devil or the Barrel
But kiss him & give him both drink and apparel. (E26)

There is hardly any glory to this sodden deity, and yet while I believe that Blake was angry with a world that produced any vagabonds there is something in these lines that conjures up the old, antinomian visions of seventeenth-century ranters such as Abiezer Coppe, who preferred to drink and be merry rather than kill for king or parliament in the name of righteousness.

THE GARDEN OF LOVE

If sex is absent from *Songs of Innocence*, it is very much present in the later *Songs*. Nowhere, however, in this collection does Blake evince the pleasantly pastoral delights of sexual love: the sexuality of experience is, rather, that of loss, rape, restriction and fear. This is not to say that Blake saw sex as something intrinsically sinful: rather, from his early poetry onwards, desire when freely expressed was an essential part of our humanity. "A Little Girl Lost" begins with the lines:

Children of the future Age,
Reading this indignant page;
Know that in a former time.
Love! sweet Love! was thought a crime. (E29)

As with several of his contemporaries, notably William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, Blake believed that it was the treatment of sexuality as a crime and its repression that led to future perversions. One of his Proverbs of Hell made the point pithily: “He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence.” (E35) While the causes of such repression were manifold, including social, familial and political power relations, unsurprisingly Blake identified religion as the main root of this distortion of human desire, as in “The Garden of Love”:

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not. writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:
And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys & desires. (E26)

The poem uses an anapaestic metre, modulating this with a headless foot at the beginning which cuts short the line: the first ten lines are written in trimeter, with the final two lines extended to tetrameter, this extension adding a finality to the entire poem – an interruption into the garden of love of alien figures who “bind with briars” the flowers of the narrator’s desire. The contrast with the *Songs of Innocence* is a powerful one: play, love and the green are all elements of a past that has not been superseded as a natural consequence of development and growth. They have, rather, been vandalised, suppressed by the grim command “Thou shalt not” (which also, significantly, breaks the rhythm of the poem). If it is sometimes possible to read *Songs of Experience* as a necessary corrective to the ignorance of *Songs of Innocence*, that is not at all the case here: the destruction of the Garden of Love is, rather, its own form of wilful ignorance and there is nothing but a sense of lament for what has been lost.

The consequences of repression finding expression in perversity is the theme of one of Blake’s most powerful, and most famous, lyrics, “The Sick Rose”:

O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy. (E25)

These two short stanzas have attracted considerable critical comment. Jon Mee (1998), following Northrop Frye's observation that the poem was one of those few lyrics that was popular because it provides a direct key to poetic experience for educated and uneducated alike, notes that it is a poem that appeals to generations of readers in an intensely personal way. Critics such as Michael Strigley (1992) have pointed out that the sickness caused by the "invisible worm" is that of the transmission of disease, but Elizabeth Langland warns against traditions of prescribing how the poem should be read, taking Harold Bloom to task, for example, for seeing pity in the opening line where the tone may even be condemnation of the rose. Langland draws attention to the ambiguity of the words of the poem, which do not clearly express where guilt lies (with the rose or the worm). Yet the illustration that accompanies the text does, it seems to me, evoke something of the pity that Bloom expresses, with images of women falling, many of them pursued by this invisible, rapacious power.

That sex so often brought with it death at the time Blake was writing, whether the plagues of sexually transmitted diseases referred to in "London", or even, as Tristanne Connolly (2002) the more mundane, but no less terrible, mortality associated with childbirth that made pregnancy so dangerous for Catherine Blake and did kill Mary Wollstonecraft, is an unfortunate commonplace. What is so effective about these later *Songs*, however, is that rather than simply adopt another commonplace, on the sinfulness of sexuality, Blake addressed rather the terrible, sad and angry wisdom which experience brought.

CHAPTER 4: CONTRARY STATES OF THE SOUL

When Blake issued *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in 1794, he added a title page with the additional heading, “Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul”. Although *Songs of Innocence* had been intended as a complete and discrete work (and he continued to issue that work as a separate book), it was clear that from the 1790s onwards Blake now conceived many of the songs from the two volumes to be read in conjunction, neither one alone capable of offering a holistic view of mankind.

As examples of Blake’s contrarian reading, this final chapter will consider three sets of poems: the two versions of “Holy Thursday”, “The Divine Image” and “The Human Abstract”, and “The Lamb” and “The Tyger”.

HOLY THURSDAY

In the early eighteenth century, a tradition began in which charity school children would attend a special service, this event being held at St Paul’s Cathedral between 1782 and 1871 (Spink 2005). As Gardner points out, these children were not destitute, nor rescued from “the lowest order of poverty”, but rather came from families of the “deserving poor” (Gardner 226), and during the century as many of six thousand of them would attend a thanksgiving service which although it did take place on a Thursday, was never on Holy Thursday during Easter week or Ascension Thursday as is often asserted. The services provided an opportunity to educate these children, but the event was, according to Gardner, more of a festival than a strictly disciplined procession.

Having witnessed one of these earliest festivals at St Paul’s, Blake was inspired to write one of his most famous lyrics:

Tw’as on a Holy Thursday their innocent faces clean
The children walking two & two in red & blue & green
Grey headed beadles walkd before with wands as white as snow
Till into the high dome of Pauls they like Thames waters flow

O what a multitude they seemd these flowers of London town
Seated in companies they sit with radiance all their own

The hum of multitudes was there but multitudes of lambs
Thousands of little boys & girls raising their innocent hands

Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven the voice of song
Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of heaven among
Beneath them sit the aged men wise guardians of the poor
Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door (E13)

While the couplets of this poem are familiar from a great deal of eighteenth century verse, Blake's long, fourteen-line lines are unusual for the period, being more typical of Elizabethan poetry. They add to a stately rhythm, slowing and making the pace of the poem gentler and, as Gardner observes, Blake avoids any satirical intent. Although David Fairer has written, in relation to this particular poem, that "Blake's texts lose their innocence more easily than most" (2002, 535), and Lincoln feels that "the exuberant tone of the poem is to some extent modified by a sense of anticlimax" (1991 161), it is a mistake to assume that Blake is here being sarcastic about the "wise guardians" watching over the "flowers of London town". That the final moral appears somewhat self-evident, even sentimental, to modern, experienced eyes does not mean that it was not heartfelt on the part of Blake who appears to have responded to this event with great devotion and humility, lavishing considerable care and attention on the more than usually elaborate border to the poem.

In the poem "Holy Thursday" included in *Songs of Experience*, Blake moves from a particular occasion in a specific setting to a general accusation against his contemporary society:

Is this a holy thing to see,
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reduced to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand?

Is that trembling cry a song?
Can it be a song of joy?
And so many children poor?
It is a land of poverty!

And their sun does never shine.
And their fields are bleak & bare.
And their ways are fill'd with thorns.
It is eternal winter there.

For where-e'er the sun does shine,
And where-e'er the rain does fall:
Babe can never hunger there,
Nor poverty the mind appall. (E19-20)

The condemnation of the extremes of wealth and poverty is powerfully made, and it is clear that Blake's remonstrance against the hypocrisy of his day is as deeply felt as his joy at seeing the children's service at St Paul's. Yet in some ways the moral of the final stanza is false and superficial—sunshine and rainfall are, by themselves, no guarantee of protection for poverty. Lincoln, it seems to me, is correct in drawing attention to the suspicion with which we should view the narrator of the poem: while the insistent rhythm of the song may emphasise its moral outrage, the speaker is unwilling to recognise any vitality or joy in his subjects, instead retreating “into generalization, and an emotional hardening, that offers little prospect of escape from the human coldness it condemns.” (Lincoln 1991 176)

THE DIVINE IMAGE/ THE HUMAN ABSTRACT

While Blake used many apparently familiar motifs of children's literature in his poems and illustrations, such as shepherds, the mother watching her baby, or children at play, the aim and tone of *Songs of Innocence* was radically different, sometimes deceptively so as in a poem such as “The Divine Image”:

To Mercy Pity Peace and Love,
All pray in their distress:
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy Pity Peace and Love,
Is God our father dear:
And Mercy Pity Peace and Love,
Is Man his child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart
Pity, a human face:
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man of every clime,
That prays in his distress,

Prays to the human form divine
Love Mercy Pity Peace.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, turk or jew.
Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too (E12-13)

At first reading, this poem may seem very familiar from generations of Christian verse, its pronouncement that God is love seeming no different to those hymns such as Charles Wesley's "Stupendous love of God most high!", first published in 1780. However, as Lincoln and others have pointed out, the difference between Blake's poem and the hymns of his contemporaries is clearest when considering the following lines from Isaac Watts's "Praise for the Gospel":

Lord, I ascribe it to thy Grace
And not to Chance, as others do,
That I was born of Christian Race,
And not a Heathen, or a Jew. (Cited in Lincoln 159)

Watts published his *Divine and Moral Songs* in 1720, and many of the hymns promise justice and retribution for those who fail to follow the message of God's word. "Praise for the Gospel" ends with the promise that Gentiles and Jews will "in judgement rise" against the speaker if he does not keep God's law. In "The Divine Image", by contrast, there is no mention of God's anger or retribution (just or otherwise), only the constant refrain that God is mercy, pity, peace and love.

Lincoln believes that Blake's hymn asserts that all religions have the same emotional basis, but also that all religions are essentially Christian. There is no reason to doubt that Blake may have believed this, but the poem does not state this quite as clearly as Lincoln does. It ascribes, rather, the simple belief that God is Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love, nothing more than this, and it is easy to see how this Song could be adapted by certain types (though by no means all) of Muslim, Hindu, Pagan or various other creeds. In *All Religions are One* (1788), Blake had written that "The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nations different reception of the Poetic Genius which is every where call'd the Spirit of Prophecy." (E1) There is no innate superiority of Christianity in this view: it is but the one response of one group of people to the divine that Blake believed intrinsic to the human condition.

And this is where Blake's poem reveals its radicalism. God is not something separate to man, but revealed entirely within and through man: it is the human face and human heart which demonstrates to us the reality of divinity. Rather than a metaphysical presence behind this world, we encounter God whenever we experience (or, indeed, demonstrate) the virtues of mercy, pity, peace and love. While these are familiar Christian virtues, their choice is significant: it would be very easy to conceive a God based on righteousness, or obedience, but these are far from Blake's conception of the human form divine. In his later works, particularly the epic poems *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, Blake was to identify this tendency to self-righteousness as the Moral Law, and to ascribe it as a spiritual condition closer to Satan than to Christ.

Blake's critique of conventional Christianity (and, indeed, organised religion more generally), was made explicitly in the accompanying poem from *Songs of Experience*, "The Human Abstract":

Pity would be no more,
If we did not make somebody Poor:
And Mercy no more could be,
If all were as happy as we;

And mutual fear brings peace;
Till the selfish loves increase.
Then Cruelty knits a snare,
And spreads his baits with care.

He sits down with holy fears,
And waters the ground with tears:
Then Humility takes its root
Underneath his foot.

Soon spreads the dismal shade
Of Mystery over his head;
And the Catterpillar and Fly,
Feed on the Mystery.

And it bears the fruit of Deceit,
Ruddy and sweet to eat;
And the Raven his nest has made
In its thickest shade.

The Gods of the earth and sea,
Sought thro' Nature to find this Tree
But their search was all in vain:
There grows one in the Human Brain (e27)

The first observation to be made about “The Human Abstract” is that it works much less effectively as a poem than “The Divine Image”. While the later Prophetic Books frequently display irregular and confusing metres, this is rarely the case in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, yet here the rhythm frequently staggers from line to line – it frequently feels as though Blake is presenting an exposition on Enlightenment ideas of religion rather than demonstrating any real feeling for his subject. Nonetheless, the underlying themes of this poem, on the hypocrisy of much that passes for conventional religion and also – in the final stanza – the resolutely human origins of religion, are powerfully made. The poem works by directly paralleling the motifs of “The Divine Image”, demonstrating how, from the perspective of experience, the virtues celebrated in the earlier song can equally function of vice in terms of a hermeneutic of suspicion.

That Blake struggled with “The Human Abstract” is also indicated by the fact that he wrote another contrary to “The Divine Image”, “A Divine Image”, which is only found in one copy of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (Copy BB). Erdman dates “A Divine Image” to 1790-1, and it was obviously intended as a direct antithesis to the earlier poem before being replaced by the subtler “The Human Abstract”:

Cruelty has a Human Heart
And Jealousy a Human Face
Terror, the Human Form Divine
And Secrecy, the Human Dress

The Human Dress, is forged Iron
The Human Form, a fiery Forge.
The Human Face, a Furnace seal'd
The Human Heart, its hungry Gorge. (E32)

THE LAMB/THE TYGER

These two poems, from *Innocence* and *Experience* respectively, are frequently taken together in critical writings, although “The Tyger” is much better known, and much more popular, than the earlier poem. Indeed, “The Lamb” is rarely discussed on its own and certainly its spiritual vision is much less startling than

that of the later song. Despite it being overshadowed by “The Tyger”, however, in many ways “The Lamb” is an archetypal song of innocence:

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.
By the stream & o’er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!
Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee

Little Lamb I’ll tell thee,
Little Lamb I’ll tell thee!
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.
Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee. (E8-9)

The apparently conventional imagery that links child, lamb and Christ is handled with what Marsh points out is a beautiful simplicity (2001 81), and while even he complicates the poem slightly by observing that the child is deducing the existence of God from the world around him, for me the child’s reaction is an instinctive one rather than rational and inductive one. What is more interesting, perhaps, is the conversation that takes place here between child and lamb: the child is talking to the lamb, asking the question (“who made thee”) before providing an answer in the second stanza. Significantly, while the poem could be read as an example of anthropomorphism, strictly speaking this is not entirely the case: Christ becomes both child *and* lamb, Godhead entering into all things. Blake’s own view of divine humanism probably would find little to object in the anthropomorphism of the natural world, but as we have seen in “The Little Black Boy”, he is also happy to see divinity infused throughout that world: it is, in later works particularly, the removal of God as a divine cause operating externally from creation that Blake rejects and despises as Deism.

The nature of that divinity is approached much more ambiguously in “The Tyger”, rightfully one of Blake’s best known works:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare sieze the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water’d heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry? (E24-5)

The popularity of “The Tyger” was not solely a twentieth-century phenomenon in contrast to much of Blake’s other work. The poem was reprinted in Benjamin Heath Malkin’s *A Father’s Memoirs* (1806), translated by Henry Crabb Robinson for the *Vaterländisches Museum* (1811), and appeared in Alan Cunningham’s *Life* shortly after Blake’s death. Charles Lamb thought it “glorious” (Bentley 394), and Dorothy and William Wordsworth copied the poem along with several other of Blake’s songs into a commonplace book, although Wil-

liam Beckford made a note in his copy of Malkin that the lines of Blake's verse were stolen "from the walls of bedlam" (Bentley 571). Many readers have been perplexed by the poem, despite the fact that it is often anthologised in collections of children's verse such as the *Oxford Book of Poetry for Children*. Plenty of critics have drawn attention to the incongruities between the forceful, sublime text and the rather domestic example of a tiger included in the illustration to this *Song of Experience*, looking for all the world like a stuffed toy.

The metre of the poem is largely the same as that of "The Lamb", seven syllables of headless iambic metre, although without the caesura that is found in the opening and closing refrains of "The Lamb". As such, the rhythm of the "The Tyger" is relentless, and the constant repetition of words such as "what" function as the drone of a hammer, pounding away at the stanzas in an act of ruthless creation. The question of who is responsible for this creation is one of the fundamental reasons for the perplexity of the poem, and Stanley Fish (1980) took great pleasure in providing two equally forceful, equally clear examples of readings of the text by Kathleen Raine and E. D. Hirsch that demonstrated completely opposing answers to the question "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"

Ronald Paulson (1987) believed, by contrast, that this question was only superficially to do with the act of creation, and of God's justice and mercy: on a deeper level, it was concerned with the conflicting experiences of the French Revolution. Certainly the events of the Revolution, especially the Terror, appear to have influenced Blake's verse, but the lines that precede the question are an allusion to the Book of Job ("Where was thou when I laid the foundations of the earth... When the morning stars sang together", cited in Marsh 87) and Book VI of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Blake reacts strongly to the political situation of his day, but for him to reflect on the world about us is not to choose between "real" and "spiritual" life – rather, that real world reveals itself as simultaneously one of the spirit when viewed with imagination.

This does not, however, answer Blake's question – and to fix in orthodoxy Blake's vision of God as sublime majesty or hellish demiurge is to diminish "The Tyger" in particular. The beauty of "The Lamb" is its simplicity, and I would resist any effort to complicate it as counter to Blake's sometimes profoundly untroubled theology: at the same time, his mind was capable of easily exploring theological complexities and, in contrast to the rationalist philosophers and theologians of his day, holding such antimonies within his imagination. This vision, after all, is why both innocence and experience are necessary for Blake to show the contrary states of the human soul.

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S*ongs of Innocence and of Experience* is the best known and most widely read of Blake's works. This guide, second in the Zoamorphosis Essential Introductions series, provides a clear and lucid account of the composition of those *Songs* as well as close readings of individual poems from the both *Innocence* and *Experience*.

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